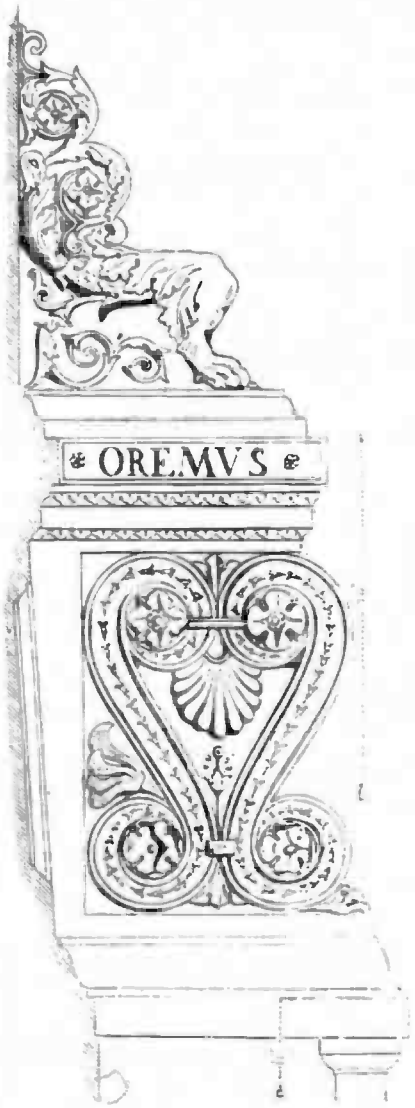
CARVED STALLS, PERUGIA, ITALY.



CARVED STALLS, PERUGIA, ITALY.

WE recently gave an engraving of part of the stalls in the cathedral at Fiezole, belonging to the sixteenth century.* Annexed is an elegant piece of ornamentation, forming part of the lower stalls in the Cathedral of Perugia, in Italy, which may serve to accompany the former.

ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM AND PUBLIC TASTE.†

THIS subject is one of considerable importance, not only to the architectural profession, but also to the public. Good criticism is a means by which the taste of the masses may be greatly improved; by its influence the public are better enabled to judge of architecture than when left to their own resources. Sheridan says,—"The number of those who undergo the fatigue of judging for themselves is very few indeed." This is unfortunately too true, and it shows the importance of public criticism, as a method of promulgating a knowledge of art. Negative criticism is worse than useless; it quickly pulls to pieces without advice or reason, instead of suggesting ideas in place of those it endeavours to destroy: the consequence is that the reader thinks no more upon the subject. Or, perhaps, the critic is sarcastic, and leaves the victim wincing under the stinging bite of ridicule. A fair specimen of this style is contained in a foot-note of "Chambers's Architecture," it being a criticism on the present Somerset House, written by an engraver of the name of Williams, who signed himself Anthony Pasquin. He says,

"This surprising, stupendous, and extraordinary heap of stones was called into order by the magic voice of that pineapple of knighthood, Sir William Chambers, at the command of the great and sapient council of this realm, in 1774. It occupies a space of 500 feet in depth and 800 in width, and altogether is a most astonishing assemblage of contradictory objects. The entrance, or atrium, is so unappropriate that it looks like the narrow mouth of economy, through which we grope our passage to the vast stomach of national ruin."

How easy is it, for a man who is thus inclined to pile a string of sarcasms together—how easy is it for a man thus to show his vindictive feeling towards another. He goes on to say,

"On the top of the corps de logis, or central part of this heterogeneous association of stones, we see a dirty black lump, which he calls a dome, and which is apparently stolen from that worst of embellishments of that worst of architects, Sir John Vanbrugh. It furnishes me with no other idea but an inverted punch-bowl, and, peradventure, might be intended by Sir William Chambers as a durable symbol of sobriety, to operate on the senses of the clerks, to keep them from tippling in the hours of duty."

What a conceited mind this Mr. Williams, alias Anthony Pasquin, must have had to pen such a production, which appears to have been written with an idea that by such spirts of sarcastic wit he could crush at one stroke Somerset House, Sir William Chambers, and Sir John Vanbrugh. This malignant attack was too glaring for its meaning and worth to remain unappreciated by the public any great length of time, and a reply to this flippant criticism was printed in 1823, from the pen of Mr. Papworth, who, in one passage, says:—"Would it not have been an advantage to public taste, if the critic who assumed this superior knowledge had pointed out the parts so conspicuously beautiful to his learned optics (this was in reference to the admiration professed by Williams of parts which he asserted were copied from Inigo Jones's original design), for we, among the rest, have yet to find them out! Master Pasquin, we have reason for believing, like many other audacious and unprincipled writers, made this assertion at a venture, knowing full well, from the success of similar experiments founded on falsehood, that public credulity, general indifference for the subject, and the prevailing love of slander, would receive his dictum as authority, and that he should, favoured by these combined circumstances, remain secure from inquiry, and escape with applause."

It has often struck me that architects rather encourage this sort of criticism. We seldom find in mutual criticism that one professional man has any bowels of compassion for another; they are very unwilling to trouble their hearers with the admirable parts of another's design, but, like wasps, leave their sting without even partially withdrawing it. It is this indifference for the subject which fosters all our troubles, and it is owing to the public being generally ignorant of our art that they are unable properly to appreciate it.

Since Wren's time, until lately, with but few exceptions, architecture has been a dead letter; men with less brains than wits have forced the bastard styles on to the public gaze, thus giving a vitiated taste, which has had a bad effect upon architecture and architects, for the desire for art in building had gradually lessened, but not so the wants of an increasing population—their dwellings and public edifices increased more rapidly than ever. Within these last forty or fifty years the principal part of London has been built—we may, with truth, say built—for, perhaps, there is not another large city in existence which evinces such a want of the architect, with such evidences of the builder.

One of the reasons I take to be, the fear architects were held in by the public: from examples which were continually springing up, it was easily discernable what a thorough want of taste and science there was amongst the profession at that time.

Another abuse of architectural criticism has arisen from the great influx of antiquaries and archæologists, who arrogate to themselves a knowledge of architectural art far beyond that which a professional man could know: not that I mean to deny that they really did know more than an ordinary practitioner, or that this knowledge may have been useful: but I am afraid in many cases it was, on the contrary, of most deteriorating effect, tying down art to certain ancient examples, which, unless reproduced with the same spirit,—nay, I may almost say with the same mind,—will look as absurd as the antics of an ape when compared with the actions of a man. Bartholomew very aptly says, "nothing stopped our predecessors in the course of beauty and usefulness. But as overtight lacing causes the straitened body to protrude sometimes in a manner which few think graceful or even decent, so now straitened architectural criticism leads to a similar result, and induces corruption in building of the very worst kind."

I would ask such critics whether they think the imagination of men has degenerated? or that they are incapable of fresh ideas? Has every thing been done that is possible to be done? Upon reviewing the wonderful discoveries made in every branch of science during the last few years, I say decidedly not, although

* See page 268, *ante*.

† From a paper read at a meeting of the Architectural Association.

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